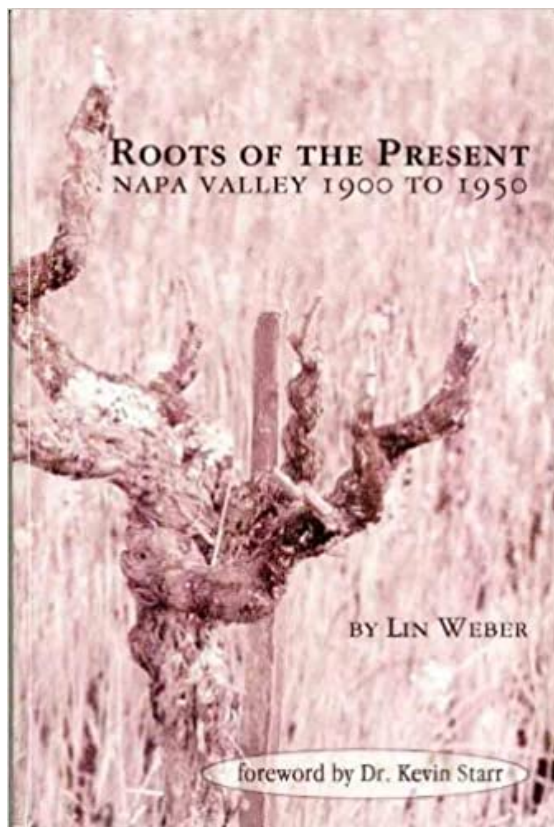


Roots of the Present: Napa Valley 1900 to 1950

By Lin Weber (copyright 2001) - Napa Library 979.419 Weber

<https://www.amazon.com/Roots-Present-Napa-Valley-1900/dp/0966701437>



Lin's ground-breaking research covers the "lost era" between 1900 and 1950, including the Berryessa Oil Rush, the 1906 earthquake, WWI, the influenza epidemic of 1918, the Ku Klus Klan, Prohibition and the Napa Valley bootleggers, WWII, the rebirth of the wine industry and much more.

Beautiful, tranquil, sparsely populated Berryessa Valley was once the rancho of a high-ranking Californio family, the Berryessas. Little by little, their grant had been stripped from them and their heirs by the political machinations of the 1850's and '60's. Now the golden, gently undulating countryside was divided among an assortment of local and absentee owners, many of whom ran cattle there. A robust stream or small river, Putah Creek, ran through the center of it. Putah Creek (pronounced "Pewter" by the old-timers) was named for the original Berryessa rancho "Las Putas." It flowed down the Middletown side of Mount St. Helena, meandered a bit through Lake County, then took a right turn and crept down through the center of Berryessa Valley.

Putah Creek provided water for the little ranching town of Monticello, where there were, at the start of the 20th Century, a little hotel, a nice hot springs resort and some pretty homes. Abraham Clark had owned most of the little valley's farming land for many years; indeed, he was the largest single land owner in all of Napa County for decades and lived in a palatial home on what finally totaled 13,000 acres. He died in 1892, but his wife and many of his numerous children were still around. His daughter Alice married G.S. McKenzie, who ran the general store and was Napa's sheriff when Bell shot English. Another daughter, Henrietta, married Berryessa rancher Joseph Harris. Like his brother-in-law, Joe would also be sheriff one day. Son Alonzo raised cattle and horses. Reuben Clark ranched there, too. They were all Democrats, and most of them were strict Prohibitionists.

Monticello had a stable community. The Dardens, for instance, had been there since 1867, growing grain on their 52 acres. Mary Sweitzer had been there even longer than that. Her husband, Lowery, had passed away back in 1878, but she carried on the ranch and owned a block of 12 lots in town. Her house was near R.H. Pithie's masterpiece, the "Big Bridge," reputed to be the largest stone bridge west of the Rockies.

Beneath the Big Bridge ran Putah Creek. It crossed the Yolo County line and wandered along a path followed in part by today's Route 128; headed toward Winters, then rolled its way east to "Davisville," today's college town of Davis. It gradually found the Sacramento River, with which it conspired, in rainy winter months, to flood the growing suburbs of the State's capital. That would all come to an end, and so would the farmlands of the Berryessa Valley, before the 20th Century was done.

The Phelans' property bordered on Joe Harris's. And it was on Joe Harris's that a curious discovery had been made recently: oil.

In October of 1900, Theodore Bell, Charles Trower, George Allen and a professional surveyor went prospecting for oil in Berryessa Valley. They returned with several full bottles that they said came from springs on Harris's place. A well should be drilled, Bell told the Napa Journal, to find the source somewhere in the sandstone and shale below. Whoever drilled that well would be welcomed to half of the claims resulting from the strike, and Bell and his company would own the other half. Three days later, the NDJ reported that an "expert" from the Mt. Shasta Oil and Development Company, Thomas Finnell, was going to develop what suddenly became the "Berryessa Oil Lands." He would run a "drift," or tunnel, into a hillside where a strong seepage of gas had been detected. There was so much gas, the article said, that the shaft couldn't go much deeper than 12 feet.

The very next day, the NDJ said that the Monticello Oil Company had just formed, with Theodore Bell as the primary owner. He was reported to have invested \$40,000. Trower, Allen, Theodore's brother Edward, A.J. Raney, and four other men also invested. Meanwhile, Joe Harris leased his 1,559 acres to Mt. Shasta, with the stipulation that the lease would terminate in a year if no oil was found.

Finnell's Mt. Shasta Company leveled the ground at the site where they planned to drill and had lumber hauled up from Napa. They also bought a 1,000-gallon tank to store what they claimed would soon be gushing from the well. They could double the output, they said, by drifting into the hillside another 12 or 15 feet. The oil they had found so far, they said, was of the highest grade, and they were using it to run their machinery. "This oil is so pure a lubricant and of such an excellent quality," Mt. Shasta crowed, "that it is being used in buggies, bicycles, etc., with better results than are attained by the best lubricating oil sold in the market. The oil is simply brought to the boiling point and strained to eliminate the sand.

Walden ran an editorial quoting authorities who promised that there would be an oil rush in California that echoed the great gold rush 50 years earlier. "Theodore A. Bell has found more vacant land and is preparing to file location on it," the paper exclaimed. "Those who wish to 'get in on the ground floor' had better move lively. Indications for oil were popping up on the Gosling ranch in Berryessa and in Wooden Valley, on the ranch of Thomas Moore. Another article hinted that "a large portion of the Finnell ranch" had just been bought by an unnamed sugar company, although everyone guessed it must be the Spreckels family's C&H.

So much oil, of so fine a quality, so near the surface, so close to home! Better get some before the Spreckels grab it all! In November a third oil company formed, this one including on its Board some of the local heavy hitters: John T. York, H.P. Goodman, E.H. Winship, Henry H. Harris, T.H. Stice, Robert P. Lamdin, A.W. Barrett, A.M. Gardner and W.B. King.

Simpson Finnell, who was not a wealthy man, financed the Finnell Land Company with under-the-table help from George Goodman, President of the J.H. Goodman Bank. Without the knowledge of his board of directors, George "borrowed" almost half a million dollars from the bank to finance the Land Company's prospecting operations and erase a large indebtedness that Simpson had incurred. In return, Goodman became sole owner of the land company. He stood to make another fortune.

The St. Helena Star followed the Berryessa Oil Rush too, although with not quite the enthusiasm of the NDJ. "An excellent quality of oil," it announced, had been found by M. Swift 14 miles north of Monticello, toward Knoxville. With Swift were L.G. Clark, Fred Ewer and Walter Sink. Traces had been found, too, in Calistoga, it added. Other members of the Swift family also bought into the oil craze. W.T. Swift and G.P. Swift founded the Zem Zem Oil & Development Company in January of 1901.

Oil strikes were making news all over the country. It was oozing out elsewhere in Northern California and positively bursting from the ground in the state's south. That very same week drillers in Texas had hit a stupendous gusher called "Spindletop," which prompted an equally stupendous land rush. Land that had gone for under \$10 an acre was now worth \$900,000 an acre. Texas pig farmers became millionaires overnight. Few in Berryessa would have objected if this fate became theirs, as well.

Now practically everyone with any cash in the bank made a bee-line to Berryessa. Theodore Bell and his brother Edward, also a lawyer, collected several others to form the Monarch Oil Company on Joe Harris' Berryessa land, including John Imrie (the Superintendent of Schools), Henry Meacham (the City Assessor), George Gardner (Treasurer of Napa County), David Dunlap (the new Sheriff), H.P. Goodman (bank owner) and James Daly (an undersheriff). Also on the roster were businessmen C.W. Armstrong, W.E. Deweese, J.H. Schuppert, L.B. Arnold, J.G. Johnson and N.W. Collins.

Not to be left out, E.H. Winship, E.D. Beard, J.E. Beard, D.L. Beard and Raymond Benjamin created the Bald Eagle Jr. Oil Company. Winship, David Kyser and others also created the Hunting Creek Oil Company west of Knoxville, a tiny mining community in the county's extreme northeast.

The San Francisco Bulletin reported in February, 1901, that Bald Eagle sold its portion of formerly cheap Berryessa land for \$35,000. The Napa & Berryessa Oil Company took out a full page advertisement in that paper later in the month. In March there was also an article there describing the oil in Berryessa as "unusually fine;" an inducement, said the paper, for someone to build a railroad in that direction. The San Francisco Post observed that the Zem Zem region was attracting investors from the East Coast.

In early April, the NDJ quoted a Colonel Crane, President of the Miners' Petroleum Association: "I consider the oil indications in Northern California," he said, "superior to any that I have seen in any part of the world.

In mid-April, A.W. Pieratt of Capell Valley struck oil after drilling down 125'.

After that... silence. There were no more big stories in the local papers about oil strikes. There may have been oil there, but somehow most of it vanished before it could come to the surface. The drillers and drifters, surveyors and investors quietly packed up their things and went away. A lot of money had changed hands for nothing, much of it going in legal and professional fees to attorneys like former schoolteacher Theodore Bell.

The value of this new form of gold was only beginning to be recognized. As a replacement for whale oil and tallow, "rock oil" or "coal oil," as it was once called, illuminated homes around the country in the form of kerosene. Gasoline was used as a cleaning solvent. Oil was converted to light whole buildings as well as city streets. It lubricated the moving parts of bigger machines, like the locomotives and cars of the Southern Pacific. But by far the most significant use of oil would prove to be as a fuel in a contraption called the "internal combustion engine." Fuel oil already powered small machines like the inadequate little engine from Stevens' Hardware Store & Bank that the volunteers used to fight the fire in Calistoga.

But when Henry Ford quit his job at the Edison Illuminating Plant in 1893 to make gasoline-powered vehicles, he started a demand that transformed the world. Ford's first automobile was completed and ready to go in 1896. The horseless carriage had become a rare but impressive sight on the streets in many American cities by 1902, and as described above, Money and Lewelling had already driven a motored vehicle through Napa. Prompted by the invention of the automobile, oil production in California had grown from 470,000 barrels in 1893 to 24,000,000 by 1903 .

The trains of the Southern Pacific, however, did most of the serious people and produce moving. The Southern Pacific owned all the railroad track in Napa County in 1901; it controlled more than 85% of all the track in the state. It also controlled the California state legislature, the judiciary, the Board of Equalization, the Railroad Commission, the Republican Party and most of the local newspapers. It even determined the price of food and wine, and people were starting to complain.

Motorists traveling east at the Y in Soscol south of Napa would eventually find themselves in Berryessa Valley, 10 miles long, a quarter mile wide, home to more cattle than people and more rattlesnakes than cattle. Wild and innocent, it bore little resemblance to the County's prune-, wine- and walnut-producing communities.

Berryessa had long been a frustration to the scores of investors who had hoped to find oil and gas there. The most persistent of the "wildcatters" was Walter B. Griffiths, a Napa realtor, state assemblyman (1909-1913) and self-styled petroleum expert. Like the prospectors who preceeded him around the turn of the 20th Century, he had struck modest, short-lived pockets of oil and gas several times in the early 1920's. Also like those before him, he had turned for assistance to Theodore Bell. Bell had helped him establish the Griffiths Oil Company in 1921 and had raised \$25,000 for the enterprise. Griffiths' strike and Bell's involvement inspired others to speculate. When someone claimed to have found oil and coal on the McCormick ranch on Spring Mountain in St. Helena, a rush of speculation started, and a hatch of new companies appeared, among them the Sugarloaf Oil Company of Los Angeles, the Wreden Oil Company of Los Angeles, the Cappell Corporation, the Napetro Oil Company and a few others. A moderate-sized company, Associated Oil, sublet Griffiths' land and produced about 10 barrels of oil a day, "very high grade and clear as crystal," according to Griffiths.²⁵ But it wasn't enough, and Associated ordered the hole closed and the riggings removed.

After Bell's death, Rodney McCormick, the local Democratic Party chairman, took over Griffiths' real estate business so that the latter could devote himself full-time to his Berryessa project. Griffiths convinced some Hollywood stars to invest. He persuaded California's Secretary of State, Frank C. Jordan, to buy shares in his company, and Jordan recruited a few others. Local Napa businessmen also bought into Griffiths' dream. But when a geologist from Los Angeles came to inspect the site, the expert advised folks to pull out. All the other little oil companies that had popped up in Berryessa soon reeled in their cables, too, and disappeared.

Convinced that Berryessa would yield oil, the driven Griffiths sank what was at the time the deepest hole ever drilled in Northern California. At 3,710', his 25'-long, heavy steel drilling cable snapped off. The line he used to rescue the cable also broke, and he had to seal the hole with cement. He tried again with another well nearby, but this time it was he who busted. He found a Los Angeles firm that was willing to finish the job on contract, but then the stock market crashed and no one had the cash to sink into questionable oil well investments. As before, the only people to profit from Berryessa's gas and oil reserves were the lawyers who drew up the contracts.

The people of Monticello loved their quiet little valley and their miniscule town, which consisted of a general store/ post office, telephone exchange/notary public/bank, insurance office, dilapidated jail, gas station, all under more or less the same roof and all run by the McKenzie family. There was a school to the southeast of town, and there were two hotels, the Monticello and the Peacock, the latter having been built in the 1860's. There was also a cemetery. Across a tree-lined street from the village proper were the rodeo grounds and a huge barbeque pit. The corrals, arena and grandstands were a symbol of the respect the townsfolk held for cowpunching. The cattle themselves munched, regurgitated and munched again in the broad meadows just past town.

Monticellans hauled down grain each summer to the warehouse at the Napa Milling Company on Main and Fourth Street in Napa. But the warehouse, which shared the lot with the Hatt Building, burned down near the end of 1935, taking bins and sacks of wheat, oats and barley with it and thus a portion of the farmers' very modest income. Hundreds of excited onlookers came to watch the Berryessa grain growers' harvest go up in smoke. A few ranchers were ruined and sold out that year.

Monticello's main claim to fame in the 1930's was not its illusory oil fields nor its good, honest grain, but its annual rodeo and barbecue. It had been attracting thousands since 1926. An outgrowth of the little valley's annual springtime cattle round-up, it was one of the first in California to feature professional contestants. The Monticello Community Club hosted the event on the first Sunday of May for 15 years, and the program was always the same. The night before the event, the barbecue committee built a bonfire of oak wood in a big pit next to the Monticello community hall. When the timbers became white-hot coals, the men and women of the committee sprinkled on a thin layer of loamy dirt and then dropped in some prime hindquarters of local- grown beef, which had been wrapped in many layers of cheesecloth. They covered the meat with more loam and then built a new fire over it all, which glowed all night. Meanwhile, they cooked up several huge kettles of pinto beans.

Late the next morning, the smell of roasting beef greeted the jam of cars that pulled into town from just about everywhere. Those who arrived early could play in a pick-up baseball game on the diamond next to the barbecue pit or just sit around and enjoy John Philip Sousa music provided by a live band, which performed all day. Early in the afternoon the barbecuers lifted the roasted beef from the pit with big hooks. An endless supply of beer was available, both during and after Prohibition, as was an endless supply of cake.

Then the rodeo began. There were saddle- and bare-back bronco riding, bull riding, calf roping and wild cow milking. There were races. There were clowns. There were courtships. Between the Blue Ridge hills to the east and the chaparral of Cedar Roughs to the west, under the hazy May sky in a gentle, grassy valley, there was a sweet, simple, down-home joy.

Napans had always admired good horsemanship. The Monticello rodeo helped to re-inspire community interest in riding. The annual Fourth of July festival in Calistoga in 1940 was renamed the "Silverado Fair and Horse Show." It featured more than 150 rodeo entries, and Napa Roping Club members won praise for "sticking to the broncs and tossing a mean loop."

Thousands attended that event, too. With more than 200 horsemen, the opening parade went on for hours. 31 In August, down at the County Fair in Napa, all the men who came had to wear beards and 10- gallon hats like in the "good old days." (Ten gallon hats, of course, were a Hollywood invention. In the good old days of the 1880's, Napans wore top hats and bowlers, not cowboy hats, and at least half spoke with foreign accents.) So well-financed and well- attended were the Silverado Festival and the Napa County Fair that St. Helena stopped holding its Vintage Festival. Horses, not grapes, were now the great attraction.

Napa, Solano and Yolo Counties met near a gorge dubbed "Devil's Gate," through which ran Putah Creek. George Washington Goethals, the engineer who had built the Panama Canal, had inspected Devil's Gate back in 1907, when he was on the US Army's General Staff. Goethals and other experts agreed that Devil's Gate would be an ideal place to build a dam. Impounding the water of Putah Creek, however, would mean flooding the little town of Monticello and drowning the cowboy haven of Berryessa Valley. To many, and especially to those in Napa County, that seemed like too great a price to pay for water.

Others, however, believed that Northern California didn't really need Berryessa Valley; Putah Creek, however, could be very useful. The Gibson family floated a brief story in the Journal about a proposed dam on Putah Creek early in 1936. It was the first many people in Napa County had heard about such an idea. "Construction of Putah Creek dam is temporarily held up," the article said, "by the refusal of one party to sign an easement allowing his property to be flooded. The expenditure of \$15,000 is being jeopardized by this refusal. The story named neither the refusing party nor the source of the \$15,000. Meanwhile, the Journal gave florid praise to the newly completed reservoir system on Spring Mountain Road in St. Helena.

By 1940, Solano County's large urban centers (Vallejo, Fairfield and Vacaville) were experiencing much more robust population growth than the cities of Napa County. Solano's parched, flat terrain knew little moisture in the hot months, and civic leaders there worried about where the water to support their people and enterprises would come from. Neighboring Yolo County also suffered from arid conditions. The soil would yield generous harvests if it could be irrigated. Yolo and Solano farmers saw that the introduction of water to the San Joaquin Valley had

enabled orchardists there to grow plumper, juicier (if less sweet) fruit. Northern California fruit growers were losing market share.

Launcelot Gamble, heir to a soap fortune, was aware of Yolo/Solano's greedy gaze on Berryessa as a receptacle for water storage. He bought up as much land as he could and held on tight. Basalt President Al Streblov did the same.

Fighting the Monticello dam

In September of 1945, two Napans' attended a meeting of the Central Valley Water Project, the huge irrigation and riparian management program that sought to control the state's liquid wealth. They raced back to the County Board of Supervisors with word that 26 California counties had passed a resolution favoring the construction of a dam at Devil's Gate. Official bodies in Solano County, they said, would make a "concerted effort" to have work proceed. The Napans vigorously opposed it, and the resolution was sent to the Project's executive committee without action.

Surveys of the area continued nevertheless. An idea for the proposed dam that stirred up additional controversy was to drill a tunnel from Clear Lake to Putah Creek so that floodwaters from Clear Lake could be collected in the dam, thus removing a winter weather problem that had troubled owners of Lake County resorts. Already unhappy that Lake County had sucked tourist dollars from the Napa Valley, local leaders were disgusted that beautiful Berryessa might be utilized as a holding tank for someone else's floodwater. The Clear Lake water proved to be too full of boron and other chemicals unfriendly to plant-life, however, and the idea went away.

While the forces in favor of the dam were formidable, there were a few agencies outside of Napa County that withdrew their support once they understood the Berryessa residents' position. The California State Chamber of Commerce, for example, recanted an earlier stance and came out against to the project. Every piece of good news was music to the ears of Monticello's worried grain farmers and cattle ranchers, whose labors produced a sixth of the county's agricultural wealth.

The Bureau of Reclamation presented a bill to Congress in the summer of 1946 urging early approval of the Devil's Gate dam. Nathan S. Coombs drew up a resolution seeking a delay while other places further up Putah Creek could be investigated as alternative sites. Berryessans donated \$4,000 for the problem to be professionally studied and sought matching funds.

The Board of Supervisors hired hydraulic engineer, August Kempkey, to concoct the stratagem that could save Berryessa, and by March of 1947 he was ready to report. His proposal required the active cooperation of Napa's "sister city." It had three key components:

- Vallejo should relinquish its reservoir in Gordon Valley to other Solano County users, namely Suisun, Fairfield and the Benicia Arsenal;
- Conn dam should be heightened and its capacity increased so that the City of Vallejo could receive all its water from Conn;
- Putah creek should be dammed in uninhabited Coyote Valley, and the water impounded there should be added to the Conn supply. Other small dams should also be built in remote locations.

Some in Vallejo liked Kempkey's plan, but there had been friction between the two cities recently, and the political atmosphere did not favor cooperation. Just prior to the Kempkey proposal, for example, there had been an unfortunate contretemps involving Napa's invitation to Vallejo to use its existing Conn Valley supply. For months Napa had been asking Vallejo to commit one way or another to buying Conn water, but Vallejo had refused to answer. Delay meant postponing the installation of water pipes. Finally, after Vallejo ignored Napa's

final ultimatum for an answer, the Napa City Council voted not to sell any water outside the county. The next week, Vallejo said it might like to buy some water. Napa refused. Vallejo then asked Napa County to help fund a full-time lobbyist in Washington who could represent the area's needs. Napa politicians questioned why they should pay someone "to slit our throats." The "sister cities" now loathed each other.

The Kempkey plan had some flaws. Karl Kadie, district manager of the US Bureau of Reclamation, put it bluntly. The value of the water in the dam, he said, was greater than the value of the land beneath it. The Devil's Gate plan was relatively cheap; building a series of smaller dams would be too costly.

Saving Berryessa was not consistent with newly emerging thought regarding resource management. The state of California now viewed itself as a huge thirsty organism, a gigantic system of mutually interdependent needs and resources. Water from the proposed Monticello Dam, for example, would not only irrigate Yolo and Solano farmland, but some of it would be sent to the San Joaquin Valley to supplement their water supply, which came from the dam at Shasta. This would leave more water at Shasta for use in generating power. Capturing and taming Putah Creek would, moreover, abate some of the winter flood problems experienced by the Sacramento River. Seen from this perspective, little valleys like Berryessa, and even large ones, like Owens in the south, could be sacrificed if necessary for the good of the whole.

Governor Earl Warren was mainly interested in the big picture. He assured a delegation of Vallejo businessmen and Mare Island representatives that he would do everything in his power to insure them a water supply as expeditiously as possible, as soon as the Bureau of Reclamation and the State Division of Water ironed out the details. When Vallejo selected vociferously pro-Dam publisher Luther Gibson as "Man of the Year," Warren spoke at the dinner given in his honor, while Al Streblov, Whit Griffiths, George Provine and other anti-Dam Napans listened quietly, sadly sipping their soup.

Napa and Solano drew up competing plans to form "irrigation districts" that would use Putah Creek water, a formality that preceded any final decision regarding a dam site. In the Napa plan, a "Berryessa Irrigation District" would use water from Coyote Valley and other uninhabited locations. In contrast, 757 Solano County residents petitioned for a "Solano County Irrigation District" that would drown Berryessa. Chief among the dam's promoters was the Chairman of the Solano County Board of Supervisors, Frank O. Bell, a nephew of the late Napa County politician.

Twisting and omitting key facts regarding the Conn Valley pipeline controversy, Bell accused Napa County at a public forum of hypocritically withdrawing its offer to share Conn water with its sister city and selfishly voting to retain all its water for its own uses. Solanan W.E. Andrews then bitterly assailed Napa for "misrepresenting the facts" regarding the dam. The meeting erupted in a furor of outraged Napans.

County Supervisor Lowell Edington flew to Washington to garner whatever help he could in fighting off the dam. He also tried to find money to improve the Napa River, a perennial problem that never seemed to get resolved. What he found was that, despite the big muscles behind the Monticello Dam movement, Congress itself was preoccupied with something having nothing to do with water management. Both houses were crammed with bills to fight Communism. The House Committee on Un-American Activities was identifying certain members of the entertainment industry as disloyal, and a Congressional sub-committee was reading through junior high school textbooks seeking pro-Red propaganda. A Southern California politician named Richard M. Nixon was riding to power on the crest of anti-Communist paranoia, together with a frightening hate-monger named Joseph McCarthy.

The fear was not limited to Communists within. The Soviet Union had been rattling swords of war in eastern Europe. China, too, had fallen under Communist rule, and when Japan withdrew from Korea in 1945, Chinese soldiers took over the northern part with support from the Russians. Due to the urgency of these matters, Congress sidelined the issue of building a dam at Devil's Gate. Thanks to the federal obsession with Red and Pink, ranchers could watch a few more seasons play out in the green and gold little valley of Berryessa.